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JESUS' CONCEPTION OF NATURE.

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IN any theory of the universe there are three things of which account must be given: God, man, and nature. These are the great terms of our thought. There is the world without us, the world within us, and the God above us. Unless we know what Jesus thought of these great realities and their relation to one another, we cannot understand him.

Jesus' attitude toward nature is a matter of deep interest. He was not a philosopher. So far as we know, he never entered into any philosophical discussion with his disciples. There is no hint of it in his memoirs. There is no trace of speculation in any of his conversations or discourses. Everywhere there is insight into being, but his words are intensely practical. And his theory of the universe can be gathered only from the implications of his words.

Much less was Jesus a scientist. There was little philosophy and less science in Palestine in his days, and his speech has no suggestion of any scientific study. He had an intimate knowledge of nature, there is an abundance of close and accurate observation; but there is no indication of any scientific generalization. Natural science lay entirely outside of his line of work.

Everywhere Jesus appears in the capacity of a prophet. He is a teacher, with a sublime thought of the world in which we live, and deep insight into human life; and his words are living truths for the souls of men. When he speaks, his thought shows no signs of labor, and he uses little or no argument; he launches his great truths into the minds of men, in the conviction that the living truth will work its own way.

Yet the truth which science and philosophy explore is implicated in all his teaching, and though he never stops to discuss it, nature was by no means absent from his thought or of small

influence upon his life. His intimacy with nature is one of the delightful surprises of the student who looks into the matter. How many were the plants, animals, and various inanimate objects of which he spoke! He seems to have noticed everything and observed it accurately. His parables are matchless descriptions of detail, and the numberless figures of his speech are equally true to nature's changing form. He had the poet's eye for the living truth.

Jesus' early life in Nazareth, and the fact that most of his ministry was in the country, not in the city, easily explain this wide acquaintance with nature. There was an abundance of opportunity for observation. Those thirty years of quiet life in Nazareth were of themselves sufficient, with a beautiful and impressive scenery ever before the eye. Then his ministry was one long journey, broken in a hundred different ways, but still one long journey along the great thoroughfares of Palestine, and into its deepest retreats. It was a life lived chiefly out of doors. The varied character of that ministry is suggested by his own words: "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head." Jesus was at home everywhere—the mountain-tops and the valleys, the river-courses and the lakes, the deserts and the fields, were all alike familiar to him.

With such an opportunity, and with the clear, open eye of the brightest intelligence, what wonder is it that his teaching does nature the amplest honor! Where else do we find such delicate perception or healthy sentiment? Nature is never allowed to bulk too largely in a world where man's fateful destiny is the absorbing thing. But nature is never forgotten, with its commanding influence over men. Jesus looks nature in the face, sees a purpose, a sympathy, and a necessity there which throw light upon the whole of man's life. He lived his own life in healthful contact with nature, and his teaching is warm with its life.

Jesus' personal feeling toward nature is a valuable index to his teaching; and his feeling in relation to various aspects of nature is clearly discernible.

There is, for example, his delight in its beauty. Everywhere in his teaching there is manifest the pleasure he took in the sunshine, the green fields, the birds of the air, the flowers of the hillside, the fresh springs of water, the vineyards and orchards. Nature was full of charm, and this charm had a great power over him, refreshing and soothing and inspiring him.

His sensitiveness to the great contrasts in nature is also very noticeable. The light and the darkness, the mountain and the valley, the lakeside and the river-course, the fruitful fields and the wilderness, have all their separate values. For rest and quietness he seeks the great solitudes; for prayer he goes to the mountain-tops; in temptation he enters the deep wilderness. His illustrations from nature of man's moral life abundantly show this appreciation of nature's great features, with its varying lights and shadows.

Then there is his fearlessness in the midst of danger. In the wilderness he was with the wild beasts forty days and defenseless (Mark 1:13). The storms of Galilee cannot disturb his calm spirit. In the height of the storm he rebukes the disciples because they are afraid. He had an absolute faith in God's providence; and his sense of man's dominion over nature was complete (Luke 10:19).

These feelings of the Nazarene in relation to nature are profoundly interesting, and throw a distinct light upon his conception of nature.

There are three ways in which we may regard nature, viz., in itself, apart from all else; in its relation to man; and in its relation to God. Jesus never spoke of nature except in its moral and spiritual relations; and yet we may easily gather something of what he thought of it in the abstract.

There is, first of all, the order of nature. Certainly there is no talk of natural laws, after the modern scientific manner. But the idea of law is paramount. There is no chance work in the physical world; everything happens in a fixed order. And Jesus uses this idea of natural law most impressively. "Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" This order of nature cannot be in any way disturbed by man; it is never subject to

human caprice. "Thou shalt not swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black." "Which of you, by taking thought, can add one cubit unto his stature?" There is a vast unchanging law running through all of the natural world, giving it unity and unfathomed meaning.

There is also the beauty of nature. We have already mentioned Jesus' intense delight in nature; but his appreciation of its beauty was not simply a matter of feeling, it was a deliberate judgment. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." Nature is beautiful in form and color, in light and shadow, in movement and music, in vastness and symmetry, in strength and gentleness; but its beauty is not simply sensuous; it is like a face, living, expressive, filled with intelligence, suggestive of our own best thoughts, deep calling unto deep. It is a beauty that is not seen at our first glance, perhaps never seen, but clothes nature with a radiance that floods the understanding heart.

Jesus also spoke often of the transitoriness of everything natural. This is an aspect of nature that powerfully affects noble souls. In nature there is continual change; nothing abides. The grass in the field, the treasures of the earth, our bodies, everything perisheth. It is a thought that was ever present to the mind of Jesus. The present order of things had a beginning, and it will have an end. Nothing is distinctly said of a new heaven and earth, though man's resurrection implies there will be such. But the heaven and earth that we know shall pass away. At the last day, the end of the world shall fully match in significance the foundation of the world.

The complete absence of any scientific speculation in Jesus' teaching is very evident. The common belief of men is also his faith. Only in Jesus the common belief is uplifted into another atmosphere, and freed of everything superstitious. Jesus' understanding of nature was the perception of a very rare and pure intelligence.

Nature's relation to man is a much more important topic in the teaching of the Great Reformer. The relation is so extensive

and so intimate that it has a profound significance in man's life. Nature soon loses its interest, except in its association with man's fateful career ; but its connection with man's destiny gives it a sublime interest.

Perhaps the most familiar thought of nature in its relation to man is that nature is man's dwelling place. It is the sphere of his life and the scene of every activity. The natural world is always with us—we are born in it, and live in it, and lie down in it. The earth is man's home, as heaven is the dwelling place of God. "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name ; Thy Kingdom come ; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Man's home is not a thatched hut, but the round green earth, washed by the sea, and overarched by the blue vault and the shining stars. He who does not live in healthy contact with nature and delights not in its infinitely varied beauty is not really at home in the world. It is the grandeur of the world that makes it a fit home for men ; and only the vanities of our petty life keep us out of our natural freedom.

Nature, however, is much more than a dwelling place ; just because it is our dwelling place, it puts a limit upon man's energies. All that man can do must be done in the midst of nature, and in harmony with her. Man is physically a part of nature, a child that must obey the authority of every natural law. And nature, while it gives man his opportunity and maintains his life, hedges him about in every action. The material conditions of man's life are never overlooked by Jesus. He heals the sick that he may teach them moral truth. Nature also lays its hand upon him, and he seeks the solitudes for rest in the midst of his labors. In gentleness or sternness, nature exerts the full measure of its power ; the soul is imprisoned and chained by the nature that is so generous and fair (*cf.* John 17 : 24).

But nature is by no means the master, for in obeying nature man rules, and nature is an instrument for moral ends. This is man's dominion over land and sea, that he bends nature to his will, and in conquering nature achieves his own good. There is a kindness in nature's rough ways that blesses the brave, strong

man. This sense of dominion was very marked in Jesus' life, and in all his teaching he speaks of material things as means toward noble ends. The whole heaven and earth is a scaffolding by which man's life is built up in righteousness. The limitations of nature become the occasions of man's moral triumphs, when the soul asserts itself in loyalty to the obligations of an ideal that far transcends all natural laws.

There is, however, another thought of nature, saddening in its prominence, for it is very prominent in Jesus' teaching, viz., the frequent disorder of nature. The tares in the field, the barrenness of fruit trees, the diseases of the body, arrest his attention. What this disorder means is apparent enough. There is no natural law broken; it is nature's revolt from man's dominion, in some way the result of man's own disordered life. Man's life has come far short of the nobleness of moral freedom; and in his folly man continually outrages nature's laws. Nature suffers in every failure of man, and nature has its revenge. There is disorder everywhere—waste, privation, defeat, pain, decay—nature unused by wise methods for highest ends, and so turning upon man like an injured beast of burden. The grandeur and the beauty and the bounty and the serviceableness of nature are often eclipsed by its savage sternness wherever there is disorder.

But this disorder only increases its meaning in another regard. Nature is a great mirror, in which man can see himself, finding symbols of the deep mystic meanings of his life. The symbolism of nature is based upon a real kinship between man and nature, and helps greatly to illumine man's way. Men have quickly recognized it and have always spoken of their life in its terms. It is specially the language of the poet and of the seer; and Jesus makes a very large and unsurpassed use of it. His imagery, and especially the parables, are the exquisite work of a master. How subtle is nature in its suggestiveness! It is the counterpart of man's inner life, and its expressive beauty flashes light into the great moral world which lies beyond.

These relations of nature to man are constantly in the background of Jesus' teaching. Jesus does not discuss any one of

them, for his teaching has a very different purpose. But they are vital relations, and Jesus makes abundant use of them. They are the simple ideas of our practical life, thoroughly attested by the common experience of men. They are, of course, in harmony with the best scientific conclusions; but Jesus' words show no trace of speculation, and do not permit of any scientific deductions.

The supreme interest of nature to Jesus was its relation to God. Jesus was a religious teacher, with his thoughts ever upon eternity, and consequently the divine relations of nature give its real meaning. Nature is aflame with the presence of God, like the burning bush in the wilderness to the eye of Moses; and, therefore, every part of nature was to him holy ground.

The sublime faith of the ancient Hebrew prophets can easily be traced in Jesus' words. God is the absolute "Lord of heaven and earth." This is the title given by Jesus in a prayer which specially recognizes God's sovereign action (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21). All power and all authority reside in him; he is the great King. Heaven is his throne, and earth is the footstool of his feet (Matt. 5:34, 35). His will lives and rules on land and sea, and nothing is impossible to his hand.

If we inquire into the modes of God's activity in nature, we find the ancient faith of men and of Israel, enlarged and illuminated. God is the creator of the world, in the beginning making all things by the word of his power (Mark 13:19). There was a time when the world was not (John 17:5, 24); but God founded it in unsearchable wisdom, preparing all things for the fateful life of man (Matt. 25:34; Luke 11:50). God also is the ruler of the universe, upholding the mighty frame and directing the mighty concourse of events. Not a star in its orbit, not a blade of grass in the field, not a storm on the hills, but is energized and controlled by that Almighty will. God also is the Redeemer of the world, not simply in renewing the face of nature every year, but in restoring order where there is disorder. This is the meaning of Jesus' miracles, and especially of the miracles of healing. God by his miraculous power lifts nature out of its decay and enlarges its serviceableness for high

moral ends. These are very meager statements concerning God's activities in nature, but they do not need amplification. Nature is powerless, nature is meaningless, apart from the will and purpose of God; and every movement in nature is tremulous with the divine activity.

It follows that nature in all its parts is a direct revelation of God. And this is the special use which Jesus makes of nature. God's presence in nature reveals his character; and to Jesus that character is ever love. We learn many things about God in nature, but God's character is a perfect unity, and wherever we see his wisdom and power, there also we see his love. This is a difficult faith for the majority of men, but Providence is a Love which fully blesses only moral heroes. In nature this sublime love of God manifests itself, and it makes its appeal unto men. Jesus saw it everywhere in the natural world; and he gives us most striking examples. God clotheth the grass with beautiful flowers, and maketh the lilies more beautiful than the robes of kings. He maketh the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth the rain upon the just and the unjust. He knoweth the wants of all his creatures, and provideth an abundance. He feedeth the birds of the air and giveth us each day our daily bread. His mercy enfoldeth all; not even a sparrow falleth to the ground without his watchful care. The love of God shineth in nature as brightly as the light of the radiant sun. There is love in its beauty, there is love in its bounty—yes, even in its terrors and catastrophes there is love (*cf.* John 11:4). It is this vision of love that explains Jesus' absolute confidence in nature and his fearlessness in the midst of its dangers. It explains also his rebukes of the disciples. For example, upon the mountain he taught them, saying: "If God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Be not therefore anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?" And in the tempest on the Sea of Galilee he chided them, saying: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Providence encompasses the children of the great King with the everlasting

love, a love that directs man in infinite wisdom toward the sublimest ends.

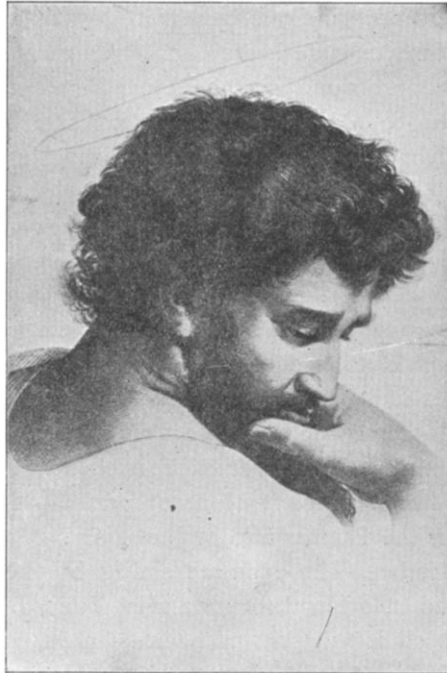
If we wish a more philosophical statement of this conception of nature, certain inferences from Jesus' words can easily be made. Jesus always spoke of God's relation to nature as a transcendent one. God's dwelling is in heaven, not on the earth. "Your Father which is in heaven," is the constantly recurring phrase. And from the seat of majesty on high God reigns. But earth is not shut out from his presence; for it is the footstool of his throne. God is everywhere present in the natural world. Jesus' words to the woman of Samaria are emphatic: "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth." The localized presence of God is, to be sure, an illusion, but the universal presence is a sublime reality. God's presence is manifest everywhere, filling nature to its utmost capacity with the wisdom and the power and the love of heaven. Nevertheless, in nature is not seen his eternal glory. God's being is not imprisoned in nature. Especially in those miracles of Jesus, God manifests his transcendent power. Nature cannot contain Him who inhabiteth eternity. Nature is impersonal, but God is a person, and his activity is personal. God's real dwelling, therefore, is far above and away. The eternal glory belongs to the unseen, and the natural world is only the outer court in the great temple.

This doctrine of an immanent and transcendent God of love sums up and illustrates all Jesus' sayings about nature. It gives us his conception of nature in a single phrase; and it fully explains his splendid attitude toward nature, both in life and death.

Especially noteworthy is his feeling that there is nothing unholy in the material world. His mind was freed of superstition. The soiling earth and the brawny muscle are divine things; and the tiny flower can teach men truths that lie far beyond the world's opinions. How grand and solemn is nature! how beautiful its sunlight, how terrible its darkness! What a

theater for human action! And how near God comes to us in the crimsoning of the blood or in the breath of the winds!

And yet nature is far from being the whole. It is even far from being the commanding influence in man's life. There are far greater things in the universe, with far deeper meanings. Accordingly, in Jesus' teaching nature is always in the background of the human drama, never put into the front for its own sake, and often completely out of view in the intensity of the moral conflict. But it is always there in the background, mysterious and sublime, bountiful and powerful, offering its silent homage unto God.



ST. PAUL.—RAPHAEL